

Entering an English Free Zone

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The Scene of the Crime

I started the school year with high expectations. When I greeted my sixth graders the first day with a sonorous, “Bonjour”, they enthusiastically answered, “Bonjour.” I spent the next few weeks teaching them the basic expressions to survive class where the teacher spoke only French. I covered my walls with key French phrases like, “What?!?”, “Really?” and “I don’t understand.” I took the time to get to know my students, develop relationships and create mutual respect.

When November arrived, I was surprised when I realized that most of the time I was the only person speaking French. My 37 students would try to speak a little French but they would soon give up when communication started to break down. Even Audrey, a heritage speaker, preferred to speak English to show off her own bilingualism. Although my students enjoyed learning, they would naturally choose the easy way to their short-term goal of communication.

After my initial anger, shame and puzzlement, I realized that their lack of effort to speak French was probably my fault. My good intentions to help them understand sidetracked me into English, often without realizing it. In order to encourage them, I accepted responses in English when I asked the question in French. This tactic had worked with pre-school and early elementary children, but it was not working with older students. I realized that my only hope for success was to raise the expectations and elicit the help of the students themselves.

Unless we show them otherwise, beginning students expect to speak the language.

Every Second Counts

Why does it matter if English is reverberating in the classroom? After all, we want students to understand. We have exciting cultural points to share. We have to get the details straight on the fund raising campaign. We have to explain the directions. We need to justify the grading.

I have held all these beliefs at different times. My epiphany came when I saw that all this English was affecting their performance. Every second counts when we see our kids less than 180 hours a year. Over the course of the year, in a traditional 45-minute daily class, the difference between 80% use of the target language and 100% adds up to 1,620 minutes or a **month and a half** of class time.

It is also brain friendly to speak the same language all the time. Switching between languages at the word or sentence level is confusing for learners. If the teacher is not a native or superior speak-

er of the both languages, switching between languages can degrade their pronunciation beyond comprehension. This will confound and frustrate heritage speakers. Switching erratically between French and English confused students who spoke Farsi, Vietnamese or Spanish at home. Even the monolingual students will tune out the target language, if they know that an expedient translation will soon follow.

Target language as the sole medium of instruction mimics the environment of first language acquisition and immersion programs. There are no short cuts when teaching a toddler to follow directions. It takes many tries, but each effort at communicating is a learning opportunity. Early language learners are very amenable to immersion settings (Connor, 1995). Although quickly explaining something in English to older second language learners is expedient, it misses a teachable moment. When we translate at the first sign of confusion, we are snatching learning from the jaws of an “ah ha” moment.

As Curtain and Dahlberg explain, if we conduct much of our class in English, “we are actually denying them access to the language and culture” (2004, p. 33) I often created realistic communication situations such as setting up a café right in my classroom. Why not profit from the most organic situation available? Daily classroom interactions allow me to teach high-frequency language functions and daily culture.

My college textbook on methodology stated that it was appropriate to use English to teach culture. When I taught elementary and pre-school children, their level of understanding of concepts forced me to simplify all culture, language and instruction to such a level that it was just as easy to provide instruction in the target language. The challenge was greater with older students, but if I focused language instruction on three to five main concepts and



skills, the students were able to use target language to identify similarities and differences, role-play and express their opinions.

Parents and administrators assume that you are doing a good job when they arrive at your classroom and everyone is functioning in the target language. Parents of heritage speakers will feel welcome in your class. Other teachers and students who stop by your class think that there is some magic taking place. By empirically tracking the number of minutes that each class speaks only the target language, you can measure and show the class's progress. Imagine the good publicity engendered when you post outside your door that your beginner class spoke Spanish for 200 minutes this week.

Reaching the Goal of Target Language Only Instruction

Even when we understand the benefits of target language instruction, it requires planning and practice. When I announced in November that I was changing the rules for my class, 37 students stared at me in disbelief. They bought into the "why" but did not immediately understand how we would accomplish this goal. It was clear that we would have to work together. The stakes would also have to be high to keep us committed to the cause.

Equip yourself

We speak French at home, so I was ready to undertake teaching all in French. Teaching my one Spanish class entirely in the target language was a challenge since like most American teachers, I am an intermediate speaker. There are solutions big and small to improving our personal proficiency (see sidebar). In the end, I found that it was most important to practice, make mistakes, learn from them and move on.

One strategy I used to build my confidence was to pledge to speak only Spanish for a day without telling the students. When I failed the first couple of times, I was the only one who knew. I discovered what tripped me up and what language and strategies I needed to deal with problems in the future. With a little circumlocution, help from more fluent teachers and persistence I was able to move to the next step of including the students.

Equip the learners

I needed to expand the direct teaching of functional classroom vocabulary: following common directions, asking for clarification, expressing feelings and reacting to events. I would accept target language "Tarzan" speech, but not English. Students needed to get comfortable with ambiguity and guessing at meaning from

Ways to Improve Your Speaking

- Study and live in a country that speaks the language
- Participate in immersion days
- Join a cultural group
- Befriend someone in your town who speaks the language
- Join a chat group from the country
- Bribe other department members to speak the target language by inviting them for sangria and tapas, wine and cheese, or sake and sushi.

context. Since my students were older, I needed to teach these skills in an explicit fashion.

Even if students cannot express themselves in the target language, they often understand or can recognize what they need to say. The Natural Approach Questions, developed by Dr. Stephen Krashen, allow us to scaffold the student's communication (1996). If a student answers easily, the teacher can ask questions that are more open-ended. Even if a student seems unable to answer a higher-level question, they may be able to respond to multiple choices. I attempt all levels of questions to allow students to show what they understand. The following questions illustrate the sliding scale from easiest to most difficult.

Questions	Examples in Spanish	Examples in French
Name a classmate	<i>¿Quién tiene la hoguera?</i>	<i>Qui a le croque monsieur ?</i>
Yes or No question	<i>¿Se aleja Jennifer?</i>	<i>Est-ce qu'un diablo menthe est rouge ou vert ?</i>
Either/Or question	<i>¿Hay templos o casas en Teotihuacán?</i>	<i>C'est une glace ou un sorbet ?</i>
Open ended question	<i>¿Dónde vivían los aztecas?</i>	<i>Qu'est-ce que tu aimes manger au café ?</i>

Finally, it is important to practice for a week with lower stakes and more chances for success. It helped us when we timed the number of consecutive minutes everyone in the room spoke French. This included pair work, milling activities and full-class



discussions. When an “intruder” would enter the room, one student assured their total silence or took a note in the hallway. No one, least of all the teacher, wished to be the one who violated our French-only pact.

After failing, we would immediately troubleshoot how we could have avoided speaking English. We soon discovered that I had not taught the students enough reaction words. We added “Yikes?”, “No way!”, “Ow!”, “Huh?” to our passwords already posted on the wall. A French visitor was surprised to hear my students react with an authentic “*Ah bon?*” - a vague expression of skepticism accompanied by raised eyebrows.

I monitored student comprehension with signaling activities and TPR while circling the room. I wanted to empower the students. Each seat had three colored flags: red, green and orange. When students were comfortable understanding the interaction they placed the green at the top of the desk. They used the orange when they were uncomfortable and the red when they were totally lost. This allowed me to adjust the instruction on the fly by adding more examples, illustrations and rephrasing when necessary.

Implementation

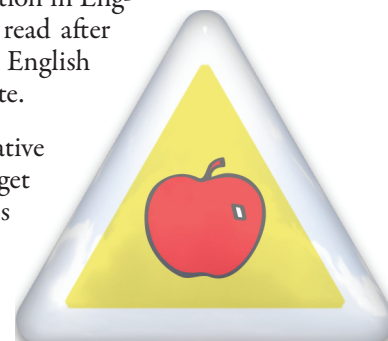
After a week, we were ready to speak the target language in a high-stakes setting. I raised the expectation by only allowing each class one chance per 45-minute class period to speak the target language for as many consecutive minutes as possible. We charted the number of minutes that we all stayed in the target language. If we spoke English two minutes into the class, we would continue to practice using the target language without counting the minutes toward our total. Students were still motivated to speak French, since it allowed them essential practice for future classes.

By pitting classes against each other, I was able to create a competitive atmosphere that still emphasized teamwork. Students would spontaneously help each other. By charting their progress, the classes gained insight and pride into their language acquisition. To the surprise of the second year class, the beginners took the initial lead which motivated beginner and continuing classes to improve their performance. Graphing the results outside your one door is way to show to the school what your students can do.

Some small tricks that helped us stay in French. Although English may be present on their handouts, we never read it aloud. We read only the target language directions. If students were confused, they were free to read silently the directions in English.

If students needed to ask a question in English, they wrote me a note that I read after class. I responded at my leisure in English or the target language as appropriate.

For time consuming administrative matters, I assigned jobs with target language names: Secretary to pass back papers, Guard to intercept and see to the needs of intruders, Runner, Camera Operator. I directly taught the names and responsibilities of these jobs in the target language.



Instructional design

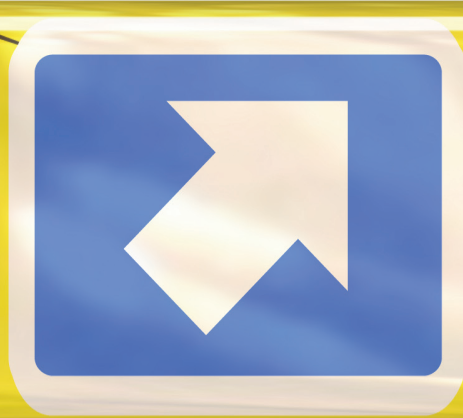
Standards-based instruction relies on communication rather than translation. Carefully designed thematic units are perfect vehicles for target language instruction, but we can also apply target-language instruction to textbooks. Students may need to learn a few more phrases to ease the discussion of the content. Soon they will be able to recycle target-language reactions and questions in new contexts.

Of course relying on charades for all your explanations can be tiring. If a picture is worth a thousand words then clipart, drawings and photos are a teacher’s best friend. There are many sources for clip art online. You may find talented student or parent artists to provide you with just the right illustration of Don Quixote. When an unexpected topic came up in class, I admit to sketching an impromptu pomegranate on the board.

I accompanied all the instruction with many visuals. We used works by Haitian artists, photos of French Polynesia, illustrated cards for all active vocabulary, PowerPoint animations of actions, stuffed animals, Cajun instruments, Vietnamese traditional dress, and plastic food. These allowed me to act out what I was saying. I also used naturally redundant language to allow the students multiple chances to understand. We used Total Physical Response, to practice and show understanding.

When activities in my lesson plans called for English, I first tried to limit the language or concepts to those directly tied to the objectives and assessment. In most cases, simplifying the language and adding illustrations focused my curriculum so that the students and I were able to express the essential ideas in French.

For concepts that could not be simplified, I rethought their appropriateness to my students. If I still found it absolutely neces-



sary to create a lesson in English, I asked a teacher from another discipline to take it over. Alternatively, I created a lesson that any substitute teacher could use while I was attending a professional conference. This protected the time for instruction in the target language.

Classroom management in the Target Language

Keeping 37 students on task all the time is a challenge in any language. I used a combination of team building, direct teaching of desired behaviors and traditional non-verbal strategies. When we switched to a French-only classroom, I immediately saw that novice level learners did not have enough language to sidetrack us; we stayed on task and language much longer.

I admitted up front that speaking French for the entire class period was going to be difficult for everyone and we could only succeed together. I had spent the first two months of class creating a cooperative environment. I was able to build morale with expressions like, "*Excellente conversation! Elle a duré 3 minutes.*" (Excellent conversation! It lasted 3 minutes.) Eventually the students began to remind each other to speak French and praise those who did.

Many of us already directly teach expected behaviors with pictures and actions. Over the years, I have simplified the directions so that novice learners can quickly comprehend and say them. I used the commands to remind them of appropriate behaviors and identify the positive behaviors that I saw. "*Merci Ian, tu travailles bien.*" (Thank you Ian, you are working well.) For more challenging classes we went over a checklist of behaviors after every activity to highlight what we did well and what we needed to improve.

I applied many traditional classroom management techniques such as voice tone and non-verbal control in the new situation. Proximity, moving closer to an off-task student, worked well without breaking the flow. I had to handle blatant violators and repeat offenders outside of class time by working with parents and administrators. At times, we modified the education goals of frustrated students. If the students wished to discuss difficult problems with me in English, they came before school.

Conclusion

The peer-pressure to succeed in the target language environment was intense, but it focused the students in a way I had never seen before. They were proud of their progress. Their efforts to keep speaking French at all costs, forced them to work together to

create communication. The heritage speakers become a special resource. Students craved new ways to express themselves in French and actively directed their own learning. When students stepped into my classroom, they were entering an all-French zone. They were in their seat and speaking French when the bell rang and the clock started ticking. Daily practice maintaining communication improved their performance on interpersonal assessments. They were more comfortable with native speakers who evaluated their performance with rubrics in the French café and Vacation Destinations units.

Curiously, each class assumed that they were my favorite and I was secretly rooting for them. After each month, the class with the most minutes was allowed to convert a learning experience into a learning celebration. When we were studying Morocco, we converted a standard lesson into a mint tea and couscous tasting with authentic decorations and Arabic and French rap music. By the end of the year, second nature led us to speak French for the intrinsic pleasure of success and students truly appreciated the power of the English-free zone.

References

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Paris taught for 17 years. Her teaching posts ranged from pre-school to adult education. She wrote the curriculum for a new foreign language in the elementary school (FLES) program in the Ankeny Public Schools in 1988. She received the Iowa Elementary Foreign Language Teacher of the Year award in 1995. Later, she taught at John Witherspoon middle school in Princeton, NJ where she worked on aligning instruction with the National Standards. In California, she created thematic units for middle school curriculum that focused on weaving culture, communication and literature. During her tenure at Pleasant Hill Middle School, she was filmed by WGBH Boston for the Annenberg standards project. She is currently the editor of *Learning Languages* the academic journal of the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL). You can contact her at paris@languageshaping.com.